

**Senators Jeff Flake and Ron Johnson Colloquy**  
**Senate floor**  
**October 1, 2015**

**FLAKE:** Thank you, Madam President. We're here to discuss a process for the Border Jobs for Vets legislation that is going to pass shortly. I would yield to the gentleman from Wisconsin.

**JOHNSON:** I want to thank my colleague from Arizona, first of all, for yielding, but also for his leadership in working with, on a bipartisan basis, members from the other side of the aisle to really accomplish something, to produce a result.

What I have been trying to do as chairman of the Senate Committee and Homeland Security and Government Affairs is reach out to every senator and ask them if you have identified a problem, if you have a piece of legislation that solves that problem, bring it in front of our committee, and I will do everything in my power to mark it up, report it out of our committee and then work with you to, first of all, pass it through the -- through the Senate and then through the house to get that piece of legislation on the President's desk to have it signed into law and actually solve that problem. And the senator from Arizona has done I think just a great job in this particular case because this is a piece of legislation that truly is a win-win. It's a win for our veterans. It's a win for border security.

I'm not going to steal the senator's thunder in terms of describing all the benefits of this bill, but I just want to mention a couple. We obviously have a huge primary border. I'm not going to -- neither one of us would I think claim that this is going to solve all our problems, but it identifies one. A staffing problem with our ports of entry, and also another problem in terms of our veterans that have served this nation and are unable to find work. So that's the win-win. This is a perfect example of a piece of legislation now that solves that problem.

You know, coming from the manufacturing sector where I never did quite understand why returning veterans with the esprit de corps, with that attitude, I never understood why they had a hard time finding work. In Oshkosh, Wisconsin, at my manufacturing plant, if I found a veteran, I hired that individual. I think what we're going to find now, I think with the what the customs border and protection is going to find is by this bill, making it easier for veterans to connect with those particular jobs, to help staff our ports of entry, we're going to find our customs and border protection is going to find that value of being able to employ the finest among us because we made that easier, and our veterans are going to have that ability to leave service and then have a really good job, further serving their country and keeping this nation safe.

So again, I just want to really thank the senator from Arizona for his leadership on this, working with me to get this passed through our committee, passed through the senate, and put on the president's desk for signature to have this thing signed into law so we could be helping our veterans and protect this nation. So thank you very much, the senator from Arizona.

**FLAKE:** Thank you. I want to again thank the senator from Wisconsin and others I will name later for working so hard on this, but the senator made sure it moved through his committee expeditiously, that we got it to the floor here, and also through the house as well. It is an example

of how the Senate and the House can work in a bipartisan way. I appreciate both the appeal that you have made to encourage us to come forward with problems that we have and vote for ways your committee can help solve them. Thank you again.

**JOHNSON:** If I could make one final point, because this is a classic example. If we concentrate on the areas of agreement, find the areas of agreement that unite us as opposed to exploit the divisions. Again, this is a perfect example, getting bipartisan support on a piece of legislation. It serves as a great example for everybody serving here in Washington to see concentrate on the areas of agreement that unify us rather than exploit those divisions. Again, thank you very much for your leadership.

**FLAKE:** Thank you. Madam President, let me just talk about the problem that led to this bill. We've made significant investments along the border in terms of our port facilities. More needs to be done, obviously, but we have made significant investments to accommodate cross-border traffic. There is a lot of good that goes on the border. We often just focus on the bad, the illegal crossings and the drug trade and what not, but there is a tremendous amount of good that happens on the border, particularly the border of Arizona and Mexico. There is a lot of commerce that goes in. Arizona's points of entry process, \$30.5 billion worth of goods in 2014. This is an increase up from \$18.5 billion in 2009. So there is a lot of good that goes on there. We have needed more adequate staffing at these ports. The border patrol that we often associate the border with, those are green uniforms. What we need more of are blue uniforms, people to actually facilitate this cross-border traffic and the flow of goods that benefits us and benefits Mexico and other countries to the south as well.

Secretary Johnson, when we asked why we were having difficulty filling these slots for staffing of these ports, he said that -- well, let me just say we authorized the Senate and the House authorized 200 new CBP officers. We authorized these positions, but as of earlier this year, only 12 -- I'm sorry, only 800 of the 2000 had been filled. So Secretary Johnson was explaining that the delays are associated with applicant backlog investigations, low polygraph clearance rates and a shortage of federal polygraph exercise combined with attrition that goes on. And so we thought what group of people do we have who have gone through these security clearances already and who could clear this hurdle and expedite this, and it's of course our returning men and women from the military and those who are there now out of service. They have in many cases already gone through the security clearances, passed the polygraph tests and could more expeditiously move into these jobs, and obviously we have concerns and we have several other programs that deal with returning veterans to make sure that there are jobs awaiting them. Let me say this doesn't affect any of the preferences or other positions that are available for our veterans. This simply requires CBP and the Department of Homeland Security to coordinate and collaborate with our military, to see what jobs are out there and see what positions can be filled.

It shouldn't take an act of Congress to get two agencies to work together like this, but sometimes it does, and so that's what this legislation is doing and it will require reporting to happen as well to make sure that this is being accomplished and the coordination is occurring. Let me just talk about some of the endorsements for this legislation, some of those groups who have helped us in explaining the need and to coming to a solution.

The Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry said that, “the Border Jobs for Veterans Act “helps advance two major national priorities -- the facilitation of cross-border commerce and the future employment of the tens of thousands of young men and women who separate from military service every year, ensuring our ports of entry are properly staffed is critical to our nation's ability to compete on a global scale.”

The president of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas said, “the Border Jobs for Veterans legislation is critical for continuing to grow our nation's economy. It's helping businesses across the country pursue -- I'm sorry, continue to prosper by facilitating trade while also using the skills and knowledge of an amazing asset we already have, our veterans, to do this important work.”

The greater Nogales-Santa Cruz Port Authority said, “border communities like Nogales, Arizona, depend on the ability of goods and people to cross the border effectively and efficiently. We have been pushing for years for more staff. This act is the most significant step taken on this issue in many years.”

The president of the Tucson Hispanic Chamber of Commerce said, “we appreciate our Arizona Senators’ approach to the problem that is impacting our communities and our economy. Any impediments that increase wait times at our ports of entry such as lack of adequate staffing, impacts our retail sales and ultimately the financial success of our business community in Arizona.”

I'd like to take a moment to thank my senate colleagues, Senators Ron Johnson who already spoke here, Senator McCain who played a critical role in this, Senator Schumer, Senator Burr, Senator Baldwin, Senator Feinstein, Senator Lankford, Senator Sullivan, Senator Tillis, Senator Toomey and Senator David Vitter for cosponsoring this bipartisan legislation. After being approved by the committee, Arizona Congresswoman Martha McSally led the House. She played a great role there. I want to thank her for leading this effort in the house.

I want to also thank everyone's support and the hard work of the committee staff including Brooke Erickson, Holly Idleson on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and Paul Anstein of the House Homeland Security Committee. Now because of their efforts, we have this bill ready to head to the president's desk.

In conclusion, let me just say those leaving the military need jobs. CBP needs officers. This is a great bill that will require coordination between the two and that will lead to greater staffing at less cost and certainly in less time. So I look forward to having the administration look at this and look forward to having the president sign this legislation.

And with that, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to immediate consideration of H.R. 2835, which was received from the House.